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Ambedkarisation and Assertion of Dalit Identity

Socio-Cultural Protest in Meerut District of Western Uttar Pradesh

Jagpal Singh

The dalits of western Uttar Pradesh, particularly the jatavs, have resorted to diverse means to register their protest and also achieve improvement in their living standards. Religious conversion, supporting mainstream political parties or parties having dalit leadership and launching socio-cultural organisations are some of the strategies adopted by the jatavs to redress their grievances. Though, currently, the Bahujan Samaj Party commands the allegiance of a large number of jatavs, it should not be overlooked that the roots of self-assertion of jatavs of western UP go back to the process of Ambedkarisation initiated by the Republican Party of India in the 1960s.

THIS paper seeks to study the impact of ideas and life of B R Ambedkar on jatavs or chamars – politically most conscious and assertive among dalits – in Meerut district of western Uttar Pradesh. It is primarily based on several trips which I took during 1992-94 to some villages of Meerut, especially Maithana Inder Singh, Khanauda, Jalalabad URF (alias) Jalalpur, Palhera, Ulakhpur and Nanglea Hareru. The first four villages fall under Sardhana assembly and Muzaffarnagar parliamentary constituencies and the rest two are located in Hastinapur assembly (reserved) and Meerut-Mawana parliamentary constituencies. These villages are of special significance from the point of view of dalit protest and assertion of their political identity.[1]

I
Dependency of Rural Dalits

In Meerut jatavs form the most numerous section of the rural poor – wage labourers, poor and small peasants and milk sellers. The Census of India, 1931 returns jatavs or chamars 12.67 per cent as the largest among the low castes in Meerut district. They equal jats, 12.13 per cent in the district – the largest among the dominant/high castes. A survey conducted in eight villages of Meerut in 1984-85 show the scheduled castes of whom jatavs are the largest as 27.04 per cent, OBCs as 25.72 per cent and jats as 16.49 per cent of the population [Singh 1992: 14,46]. The socio-economic conditions of dalits in Meerut are related to the nature of their relationships with the rural rich-landlords, and rich and middle peasants, who mostly belong to the high/middle/dominant castes – jats, gujars, tyagis, rajputs, brahmans and Muslims high castes.[2] The dalits are dependent on the rural rich. The relationships of dependence are of two types: first, mutual, two-sided, and second, one-sided. In the mutual dependence the dalits and the rural rich depend on each other in particular processes or phenomena involving the relationships of dependence. The existence of such relationships depends on their mutual interests. In such cases of dependence the dalits can bargain with the rural rich. But in the case of one-sided dependence on the rural rich – for cutting grass from the fields, defecating in the fields, passing through the boundaries of the fields, throwing garbage – the dalits cannot bargain. The existence of one-sided dependence depends on the discretion of the rural rich. The relationships of dependence get reflected in social, economic and political relations between the dalits and the rural rich. The former are not allowed to cast votes, their women are molested and raped, they are forced to do begar, they are asked to behave 'properly'. In Meerut, like in many parts of western UP and Haryana, the relationships of one-sided dependence play more decisive role in determining the social, economic and political relations between the rural rich and rural poor [Singh 1992:65-86].

The dalits protest against the oppression/exploitation through 'every day forms of resistance', informally organised ways, litigation or political intervention. The rural rich oppose the resistance/protest of the dalits by imposing sanctions against the latter: they are not allowed to defecate in the fields, to cut grass from their fields, are prevented from passing through the boundaries of their fields, asked to pay the debt then and there itself; and in case of the small and poor peasants – they are deprived of the basic agricultural amenities, they are not provided with water from the tubewells of the rural rich [Singh 1992]. Even assertion of cultural or political identity of dalits, which is expressed through installation of Ambedkar's statues, taking out processions to mark celebration of his birthday, etc, is met with opposition often resulting in caste clashes, leading to imposition of sanctions against the dalits.

The harassment/oppression of rural dalits gets minimised to a large extent in the villages where they have some alternative means of livelihood either because of the nearness to the main city or due to the availability of some cottage industry at the village level. This is also true of those villages, where they form a large section of population and have alternative means of livelihood, and the villages which have the zamindari background. The presence of these factors, however, does not eliminate the harassment/oppression of the dalits completely. Such alternatives do not eliminate all kinds of dependence. But the harassment/oppression/exploitation of the dalits is more intense in the villages which have the *bhaichara* background.[3]

II
Forms of Dalit Protest

From the late 1970s, there has been a tremendous growth in the consciousness among the dalits about the ideas and life of B R Ambedkar – a process which for the sake of brevity can be termed as Ambedkarisation. In many villages, committees, schools, libraries named after Ambedkar have been set up, and his statues have been installed. April 14, Ambedkar's birthday, is celebrated with fervour and gaiety: plays exposing discriminatory caste system/Hindu religion/culture, are staged;

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prabhat pheries and processions in the accompaniment of singing of songs and slogans in praise of Ambedkar are taken out. The processionists exhort dalits to read Ambedkar literature, not to compromise on dignity, to greet each other with 'Jai Bhim' rather than with 'Ram Ram' or 'Namaste'. Children who excel in studies or sports are given prizes.[4]

This is the second phase of Amebedkarisation in which the second and third generations of dalits born after independence play the leading role. The first phase was led by the first generation of dalits under banner of the Republican Party of India in the 1960s. [For RPI movement in UP see Duncan 1979; Lynch 1969: 137-63]. With the prominent RPI leader B P Maurya joining the Congress in 1971, the RPI movement petered out. Regarding the adverse impact of Maurya's departure to the Congress, one activist of Jatav Mahasabha and active Janata Dal member said, "Maurya Saheb destroyed the RPI by joining the Congress. (He) deceived the (dalit) society. (He) dissolved the party at his level".

However, some dalits who were inspired by the RPI, converted to Buddhism. Those who became school teachers, lawyers, government employees or remained landless workers continued to preach the ideals of Ambedkar. For example, Master Amar Singh of Nagla Hareru village, who converted to Buddhism as result of RPI movement in the 1960s, was posted as a school teacher in village Khanauda in 1978-80. After the school, he daily devoted his time to spreading Ambedkar's ideas. He used to distribute Ambedkar's literature, discuss the relevance of Ambedkar's ideas and need to discard Hindu religion. He was not supported by most dalits at that time. But today there is a statue of Ambedkar in the village, there also exists an Ambedkar committee, and Ambedkar's birth anniversary is observed in the village with fervour and gaiety. An Ambedkar Bhavan also is under construction in this village.

The second generation of dalits which joined the colleges and universities in the 1970s learned more about Ambedkar's views. They worked to impart his ideas among the dalits of their villages. But many of them could not continue to work in the villages, for they had to leave villages seeking jobs outside. However, their work had some impact in giving rise to the third generation of Ambedkar's followers. This third generation includes students from school to college levels, college and school drop-outs, government employees, teachers in aided and unaided schools,[5] poor peasants and wage labourers. They get support of all age groups in this socio-economic movement.

In the perception of many dalits Ambedkar was discriminated against by the leaders of the national movement, particularly M K Gandhi. Differences of Ambedkar and Gandhi over the Poona pact, the latter's view on varna system are seen as an attempt to retain caste system, and as a humiliation of Ambedkar by Gandhi. Gandhi's coining of the term 'Harijan' is seen as derogatory.[6] The criticism of Gandhi by the BSP leader Mayawati for using the term 'Harijan' or vandalism at Gandhi's samadhi in Delhi a few years ago or the threat of a BSP leader from UP to boycott 125th Gandhi birth anniversary need to be seen in this context. Some dalits even give credence to the rumour that Ambedkar was poisoned by his brahmin wife.

Influenced by Ambedkarisation, the dalits question the Hindu caste system, which they identify with Hindu religion. Some of them have converted to Buddhism, which they feel gives them dignity and equality. As the impact of Ambedkar's ideas continues to grow from the late 1950s, so does the process or need for conversion to Buddhism.[7] Affected by the powerful ideology of Ambedkarism, social discrimination at general level and personal experience of it prompt some of the dalits to convert. Master Asha Ram of Maithana Inder Singh village, now in his 50s, is a Buddhist convert. He is also the election commissioner of Akhil Bharatiya Baudha Sabha. He narrated how his personal experience of humiliation in 1965 ultimately led him to convert in 1989.

> In 1965, I was a teacher in a school of my village. The school teachers got the invitation to attend a marriage party in the family of a high caste. After we finished eating, among all the staff members, only I was asked to lift my *pattal* (plate made of leaves). Being an educated person, I felt insulted. Then I realised that the Hindu society (read religion) is plagued with prejudice: a shudra, howsoever, educated he may be, does not have dignity. On the contrary, a high caste person, who is uneducated, is respected, considered worth worshipping. Having realised this, I read about Islam, did not find equality in it; met a Giani Ji to know about Sikh religion. They (Sikhs) also have some sort of hierarchy. Taking inspiration from Master Amar Singh, who converted to Buddhism sometime in the 1960s, I converted to Buddhism in 1989.

Another Buddhist convert, a government employee in the railways said:

> On 6th December, 1956, when Ambedkar died, my father said "Dr Mar Gaye" (Dr is no more). He could not even pronounce the name of Dr Ambedkar. I was in class Ist at that time. Since then I became curious to know about Dr Ambedkar – came to know about him, read about him. Since then I became admirer of Dr Ambedkar, read his literature...converted (to Buddhism) at the time of Ambedkar Jayanti in 1978.

Although many of the dalits have not converted, they do not appreciate Hindu religion. Some express desire to convert at an 'appropriate' time.

The dalit protest against the dominant culture can also be observed in their search for an alternative mode of idol worship and construction of temples. Setting up their 'own' temples named after Valmiki, Ambedkar or Ravi Das by dalits is not uncommon. Interestingly, as part of the Ambedkarisation process, the first attempt in some villages has been to construct Ambedkar or Ravi Das temples. For example in one village, first a temple in the name of Ravi Das was constructed on the premises of the house of a dalit, and after some months Ambedkar's bust was also placed there. Now there is an Ambedkar/Ravi Das temple in the village. Construction of such temples by dalits and their observance of Hindu rituals in marriages, celebration of Holi or Diwali prompts some critics to point out that the protesting dalits are not different from whom they criticise: that the dalits too believe in temples and idol worship, and have not discarded Hindu rituals. Such criticism takes Ambedkarisation or Socio-cultural protest as an absolute phenomenon, and not a process which is reflection of protest. In fact, the need to construct alternative temples is reminiscent of Adi Hindu and bhakti movements which took place in some districts of UP or of tiyya's (low caste) movement to start the community of worshippers of equals against Nayyar's (high caste) control over the shrine worship in north Malabar in the late 19th and early 20th centuries [Guptoo 1993; Menon 1993]. There, however, does not seem to be any obvious link between the search for alternative mode of worship of the present time in Meerut with that of the early 20th century. They prefer to be referred to as 'jatvas' a more respectable and acceptable term, rather than chamars [Singh 1993:326].

Some dalits, however, despite their admiration for Ambedkar, consider the

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pacifism of Buddhism as a weakness. But this does not dampen their urge to convert. Having rejected Buddhism as an alternative to Hinduism, some of them have converted to Sikhism.

While the conversion to Buddhism took place because of ideological reasons – inspiration from the ideas of Ambedkar, and personal humiliation – proselytisation to Sikhism occurred because of security reasons. Security became the main concern of Jatvas against the attacks on them by the goons of Muslim landlords in village Nagla Hareru.[8] Finding the pacifism of Buddhism a hindrance to their security (which they could experience through some Buddhist converts of their village), the militancy of Sikhs at the time of Punjab movement, encouraged many jatavs to convert to Sikh religion in Nagla Hareru in 1988-89. The news of conversion spread to other villages. This attracted a large number of dalit onlookers to this village from various villages as well as Sikh and Hindu militants from outside. Shiv Sainiks opposed the conversion. A situation of near confrontation between Sikhs and Shiv Sainiks arose. Because of the efforts of the Sikhs, the onlookers were allowed to enter Nagla Hareru. As to how he converted to Sikh religion, one of the Sikh converts from Maithana Village on January 3, 1994 said:

> On January 26, five years ago, I became a Sikh. I went to see what was happening in Nagla Hareru...People from outside went to see conversion ceremony...I did not go there to become a Sikh. I saw Shiv Sainiks preventing people (dalit onlookers who had come from outside) from entering Nagla Hareru. Sikhs thwarted the attempts of Shiv Sainiks, and they (onlookers) were allowed to enter the village. It was because of Sikhs that we were allowed to enter the village Nagla Hareru. Then I also decided to become a Sikh. I became a Sikh (Amrit Chakha).

Several dalits converted to Sikhism in 1988-89 in villages – Pabla, Chhota, Mawana, Rahawati, Naya Gaon, Kishorpur, Khaladpur, Nagla Hareru and many other villages of Meerut, Ghaziabad, Bijnore and Muzaffarnagar districts of western UP. On November 27, 1988, 50 jatavs and on January 26, 1989, 290 jatavs converted to Sikh religion in Nagla Hareru. On April 29, 1989, foundation of a gurudwara was laid by Akali Dal leader Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Arora in this village [Deep 1989: 14-27]. Most of these villages fall in Mawana tehsil of Meerut district and Hastinapur reserved assembly constituency.

Two points are noteworthy in this context. First, the conversion to Sikh religion started in village Nagla Hareru, a village where some dalits had converted to Buddhism under the impact of RPI movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Second, this village is dominated by Muslims and not by Hindu high castes. A conflict between the jatavs and Muslims in the election of village pradhan in 1988 provided the provocation and backdrop for conversion. Incensed by the audacity of jatavs to contest for the post of pradhan, the hired goons of Muslim landlords let loose terror on the jatavs of the village. The incident took place when most of the jatav male members had gone to Mawana town to hear the counting of election for village Pradhan. The goons fired from the roof tops. Regarding the reasons of conversion and its impact on their status, a Sikh convert from Sethawali village said:

> (prior to conversion), we were not respected: whoever wanted to beat us, could do so. We would always weep because of the atrocities of jats. One of the youths recently murdered (by jats) belonged to our village. Police dilly-dallies in apprehending the murderers...we become victims of police atrocities...we thought there is only one way to be safe: convert to Sikhism (Sikh ban jao). Now nobody will say that I am chamar. My status has been elevated in other's eyes. (*Dusrron ki Nazron Mein Meri Izzat Barh Gayi Hai*) [Deep 1989: emphasis added].

Conversion to Sikh religion evoked a mixed reaction from the relatives, family members and caste of the converts, and from society and some dalit politicians. Arya Samaj organised a three-day *shuddikaran* (purification) in order to reconvert 'neo-Sikhs' to Hindu religion. Piqued by the *shuddikaran* one Sikh convert remarked, "have we become impure by having become Sikhs?" [Deep 1989]. Because of this pressure, some of them have reconverted to Hindu religion. One Congress politician unsuccessfully attempted to prevent the conversion of 29 dalits to Sikhism in one village; one convert told me that this politician warned that conversion would reduce the number of dalits, and that he had even brought the police to the village to thwart the plan of conversion. One convert in Maithana Inder Singh village, who got his hair and beard shaven off still expressed his adherence to faith in Sikh religion. When asked why he got his hair and beard shaven off, he attributed it to his illness. But some villagers told me that he was pressurised to do so by his brother, who is a government employee and who feared that after conversion his progeny would lose the benefits jatavs (SCs) are entitled to. Some ex-converts in Ulakhpur village said that they had to get their hair and beard cut due to the practical reasons: they were criticised within their caste. Since some of them happen to be poor peasants and wage labourers, growing hair proved to be inconvenient. Some of them said that they were denied jobs in Meerut city, being suspected as Sikh militants.

There is reconsideration on part of some Buddhist converts about the conversion. Regarding this some Buddhists said that following Buddhism was not easy; one loses the status of scheduled caste for getting reservation and other concessions[9] and it is difficult to follow principles of Buddhism. One of them criticised some Ambedkarites: "They follow Ambedkar of pre-1956 period". He opines that though conversion to Buddhism gives honour and dignity, if some reforms are introduced within Hindu religion, there will not be any need to renounce it. He said:

> If prejudices (*rudhivadita*) of Hindu religion are removed, it can be reformed. Dalits can stop going to other religions; there will not be any need for proselytisation. Hindu religion needs reformation. I have already changed my religion. Now I cannot become Hindu again.

It is noteworthy that both Buddhist and Sikh converts are critical of each other. The former accuse the Sikh of being influenced by militancy. The latter accuse the Buddhists of being docile and pacifist. They also say that Buddhism is not a religion; it is politics.

Even prior to, i e, Ambedkarisation and political assertion of dalits, from the late 1970s to 1990s, there have been two types of protests on issues relating to dalits in Meerut district in the post-independence period. First, dalits were mobilised by the professional politicians as a section of the rural poor, and not as an exclusive social group. The issues relating to dalits were part of their broad agendas. The non-Congress Parties – socialists (SP, PSP, SSP) and CPI mobilised them through hunger strikes, demonstrations or satyagrahas on wide range of issues – distribution of gaon Samaj land, arrangement of ration, abolition of begar, provision for better wages, curb on inflation, protection from the socio-economic harassment by the landowning classes, and problems

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caused due to recurrent natural calamities in period between 1957 and 1964, and 1972; floods due to heavy rain, food scarcity caused by the attacks of Pyrilla and locusts. The late 1950s and 1960s also witnessed the mobilisation of dalits by the RPI mainly on the issues of land to the tiller and minimum statutory wages. The Congress on the other hand adopted three-fold policy regarding the dalits and rural poor: (a) it cashed in on the embittered relations between the dalits and the landowning classes, (b) it propagated its policies and 'achievements' among them, and (c) it dissuaded them from participating in agitational politics [Singh 1992:93-95].

The second type of protest took place at the initiative of the rural poor, including the dalits or jatavs, though the outside forces like politicians, activists and the press got involved at a later stage. The protest was against their social, economic and political oppression and was expressed through "every day forms of resistance". This type of protest emanates from the nature of agrarian relations or from the relationships of dependence as alluded to in Section I. Jat-chamar clashes in western UP owe a lot to the phenomena of dependence, resistance and sanctions at the village level. Such protest takes place every day in one or another form since oppression/exploitation takes place every day.

Increasing Media Literacy

Apart from the legacy of the RPI movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, media explosion into the rural areas in the 1980s along with the rise of an educated section among the dalits, though many of them school and college drop-outs, has contributed to their awareness about the happenings in the country, about asserting their identity and protecting their self-respect and dignity. These factors have sharpened/moulded their perception *vis-a-vis* their social position, political potential and 'others'. Up to the late 1970s and early 1980s radio was the main source of information. But those possessing radio sets rarely listened to the news: their main interest used to be to listen to entertainment programmes and programmes for villagers. The arrival of television in the 1980s encouraged media explosion; telecast of 'Ramayana' serial prompted many of them to purchase TV sets. Now the villagers keep track of emotive and controversial issues. There are television sets almost in every locality of villages: those who do not possess TV set, watch television in the neighbour's house. In my discussion with villagers, they often referred to the TV news or the vernacular newspapers. For example, in Maithana Inder Singh village, JD-turned BSP supporters referred to televised 'debate' between a BSP leader and BJP leader when the assembly election results of 1993 were being declared. They gloated over the fact that the BSP leader's performance was better in the 'debate'. Similarly, the supporters and opponents of Mandal Commission report followed the TV news in 1990s, or news about renaming of Marathwada University after the name of B R Ambedkar. There is also surprising rise in the readership of vernacular newspapers and magazines, particularly of *Dainik Jagran, Amar Ujala* and *Maya*, among the villagers.

III
Socio-Cultural Organisation of Dalits

Not only do the dalits now want a party based on dalit ideology, they also set up cultural and social organisations, i e, Dalit Sangharsh Vahini/Dalit Sena/Dalit Sangharsh Samiti/Bharatiya Mazdoor Union (BMU)/Ambedkar Kalyan Samittee/Ambedkar Committees/Jatav Mahasabha, etc. Some of these organisations have open or clandestine political affiliations (for example, Dalit Sena is affiliated to Janata Dal and is patronised by Ram Vilas Paswan), while some claim to be 'apolitical'. Some of them exist for short period and then disappear to reappear under different name. Their social base is same and even their membership overlaps. Whatever may be their differences in terms of party affiliations, or in loyalty to one or the other national level dalit leader, modus operandi of raising dalit problems, they share common concern: to raise the issues related to socio-economic problems of dalits and their adoration for Ambedkar.

It is noteworthy that except for a short period of RPI movement, as mentioned earlier, the issues relating to dalits from the 1950s to early 1970s were raised by the professional politicians generally belonging to non-dalits. The dalit issues were part of their broad agendas. The situation assumed a different turn from the late 1970s: now, the dalits took initiative to raise their issues either through different organisations or at individual level. They seem to be exclusivist in nature. If at all non-dalits or political forces intervene, they do so at the later stage. This was not the case till the mid-1970s.

Though the need for formation of such organisations is ubiquitously felt, sometimes certain incidents, like dispute between jatavs and dominant castes (mostly jats) which is a common feature in the region, provide immediate reasons for setting up the organisations. For example, the highhandedness of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) supporters forcing dalits to join the BKU agitation was an immediate reason for foundation of the BMU.[10]

The Jatav Mahasabha is also one such organisation. Founded in 1982,[11] its founder Jagdish Prasad claims that it has branches in Bulandshahr, Agra, Lucknow and some other districts of UP. Jagdish Prasad was a Pradhan of his village when he was inspired to set up Jatav Mahasabha, taking one from the Gujar Mahasabha which came to his notice when he visited a village near Shahadra. The Jatav Mahasabha became very active on the issue of Maithana episode,[12] in 1984. The Mahasabha held panchayats (meetings) in several villages. Its membership is open only to jatavs. It is apolitical in that it does not have any political affiliation, but its membership is open to jatavs belonging to different political parties. Rules and regulations of Jatav Mahasabha lay down that five jatavs from every village elect their president; and each jatav house donates one rupee. There is a *mukhiya* for eight villages a president for a district, a chief to wook over 51 villages, and one regional president (adhyaksha). The aims of the Mahasabha are: protection of jatavs from the atrocities; removal of social evils, dowry, harassment of women, setting up educational institutions and technical service centres. To give an instance, the Mahasabha intervened in a case of one-sided divorce. The family of the groom was penalised to pay Rs 20,000 to the bride's family. The groom was socially boycotted. The groom abode by the decision of the Mahasabha. After a few months, however, his social boycott was lifted.

Whenever necessary the office bearers of the Jatav Mahasabha hold a meeting, and the decision is conveyed to dalits of all villages. Interestingly, even in the absence of any initiative from these organisations, jatavs hold meetings through informal mobilisation. Such meetings discuss urgent matters relating to disputes over land, caste, harassment of women, etc.[13]

The Dalit Sena, unlike the Jatav Mahasabha is not apolitical. It was set up

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in western UP in 1986-87. The need for it was felt when Ram Vilas Paswan unsuccessfully contested Bijnore parliamentary election. Although membership is open to all 'dalits' (OBCs, SCs and Muslims), it is by and large dominated by jatavs. Dalit Sena launched Dalit Siksha Andolan in September 1991 (*The Times of India*, February 1, 1992) in eastern UP. But no such attempt was made by it in western UP. When told about such movement in eastern UP, the Dalit Sena general secretary and its activists of western UP pleaded ignorance. Their main concern in western UP has been to take up the issues relating to the social harassment of dalits, and prepare them for their empowerment.

IV
Competing for Dalit Vote Bank

Assertion of dalit identity is also reflected in their aspiration to rally behind a party of their own. From 1977 onwards dalits have shifted from the Congress to JP, JD, SP and BSP. In the 1960s they shifted to the RPI. In fact, even when they had formed a part of the Congress' social base, they had felt the need to have the party of their 'own'. Despite their appreciation for the Congress policies, a feeling grew among them that the Congress was a party of high castes: it was using them as a vote bank. A section of them had shifted to a party which was led by the leader of their caste or was supported by national dalit leader. But as soon as the new alternative dissatisfied them as when their leader joined a mainstream political party and their party ceased to exist, they swung back to the Congress. When B P Maurya merged the RPI with the Congress or when the Janata Party disintegrated in the late 1970s, they had shifted back to the Congress [Singh 1992: chapter VI].

The relatively better performance of the BJP in western UP in 1993 election seemed to have blurred the influence of JD, SP and BSP. In fact, the performance of the BJP should not lead one to lose sight of the parties which tend to mobilise the dalits. No doubt, the BJP has fared better. But it has not penetrated all sections of Hindus equally. And the jatavs have been the least affected by the BJP.[14] They identify the BJP with Hindu religion, high castes and party based on ideas which are contrary to Ambedkarism. However, in some villages, a section of dalits has become supporters and sympathisers of the BJP. In village Palhera, for example, there is branch of the BJP and the RSS. A jatav BJP member of this village, who is a member of the municipal council of Meerut, claimed that Palhera has 50-60 RSS members including some jatavs. Starting his political career as a 'social worker', this jatav BJP member entered the BJP via Congress. He, however, wanted to join the BSP. Although he respects Ambedkarism, he questions the honesty of those who converted to Buddhism. He expressed his views about Ambedkar and Buddhist converts in the following way:

> Babasaheb (Ambedkar) did not convert. He only changed his sect (*panth*). He did not adopt other religion, foreign religion, Babasaheb did not leave Hindu religion. Boddh religion is part of Hindu religion. One does not know what were the circumstances under which he (Ambedkar) converted. (He) did not live long after conversion. Had Babasaheb been alive now, perhaps he might have thought about his conversion.
>
> The followers of Babasaheb did not adopt his views. The scheduled castes even today follow Hindu customs and rituals. Where has all the talk of Buddhism gone?
>
> The believers of Buddhism are used to excessive intoxication. Babasaheb had opposed intoxication.

Having entered the electoral politics in 1985 assembly elections with independent candidates and later in the parliamentary elections in Bijnore and Hardwar seats, the BSP did not take much interest in western UP. Before 1996 elections, jatavs also remained divided between the JD and the SP (BSP's ally in 1993 election). The BSP is adored by jatavs, a section of dalits. Its rise is different from that of RPI, JD and alternatives to the Congress. The main concern of the RPI was ideological and political; it not only attacked the Hindu system and advocated conversion to Buddhism, it also took up the issues relating to dalits' social and economic amelioration. It combined social issues with economic radicalism [Duncan 1979:245-47, 250-54]. For the BSP, on the other hand, the main concern is empowerment of the 'bahujans'.[15]

Unlike the philosophy of Ambedkar, the BSP does not provide a critique of hinduism. Nor does it provide an alternative to Hindu system through protest like conversion. It, however, does speak against the caste system, but it does so only against the casteism of high castes. Understandably it does not speak against reverse casteism. Against this backdrop, the BSP can be content with the replacement of high caste 'hegemony' in politics and administration, and empowerment of the 'bahujans'. Ambedkarism goes beyond that: it is ideological; it attempts to demolish Hindu system and provide an alternative. The BSP can ally with any political party irrespective of its ideology including the BJP for getting power. In this connection, while studying the BSP in Jaunpur district of UP, one scholar quotes Kanshi Ram from one of his interviews:

> I hate JD and regard V P Singh as the greatest enemy of dalits. In fact, *if it comes to choice between JD and the BJP, I would prefer the latter.* If I had agreed to such a political pact, V P Singh would not have been occupying the centre stage [Lieten 1994:778-79; emphasis added].

The BSP has taken ambivalent stance on the dalit-middle caste conflicts depending on its political expedience. It has highlighted the harassment of dalits as much as it has underplayed it. But it has shown no concern for the issues relating to land reforms [Mishra 1994a:723; Lieten 1994:779]. It is mainly concerned with the improvement of 'bahujan'. It can do so even at the cost of minority sentiments. Mayawati's reported statement that the Muslims are traitors, and the BSP's pressurising the UP chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav to take action against ex-minister, Masood Ahmad, through the so-called anti-defection rally of the BSP held in Lucknow on July 10, 1994, illustrate this attitude.

It must be noted that when the BSP held anti-defection rally, the BJP adopted a conciliatory stance towards the BSP. In a conciliatory tone Kalyan Singh, the present chief minister of UP, said: "We have political differences with the BSP, still in principle we support the cause for which they are organising their July 10 rally in the state capital" (*The Hindustan Times*, July 7, 1994). The BSP, however, did not respond to the BJP's conciliatory stance. But it kept its option open. This is in contrast to the ideology of the RPI (Ambedkarism) which might be averse to an alliance with the party aiming to work for Hindu religion.[16]

The BSP not only reflects an ideology to challenge the high caste domination, it also reflects the emergence of a politically ambitious section among dalits. While everybody swears in the name of Ambedkar and promises to get social justice to dalits, there are many who would support/join any party provided they get some political mileage out of it. Their first option

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obviously is to side with the party which apparently claims to espouse the cause of dalits. Those denied entry by one party, would not have any compunction to switch over to any party even if its ideology is not in consonance with dalit issues. Therefore, there exists political contradictions among the emergent dalit sections.

The BSP which did not take special interest in western UP after the elections of Bijnore and Hardwar, started doing so within a few months of forming the SP-BSP government in UP. It took note of the process of Ambedkarisation that has taken root in the region. It is in this context that Mayawati's statements about Gandhi have to be viewed. Disputes over the installation of Ambedkar's statues, celebration of his birth day are becoming quite common. The Shergarh incident of April 1994, resulting in the scuffle between the administration and dalits spurred dalits leaders of various parties to cash on it. There seemed to be a competition among the BSP, JD or Dalit Sena and BJP dalit leaders to woo the dalits.[17] The Hastinapur assembly by-election in May 1994, provided impetus to these leaders to exploit the Shergarh incident.

Although the BSP did not fare well in western UP in 1993 election, its performance in the rest of UP, enabling it to form coalition government with the SP in the SP-BSP in the state, endeared it to several dalits. Many of them expressed dismay over the BSP's lack of interest in western UP in 1993 elections. One of its sympathisers and Jatav Mahasabha activist from Jalalpur village said:

> Perhaps there was some lacuna at the political level. They (BSP leaders) did not make any attempt (to seek the votes of dalits of Meerut or western UP). (They) did not take the (dalit) political people into confidence. (They) did not even send their manifesto to us.

In fact, a group of Jatav Mahasabha activists who had supported the JD in 1993 had shown, after the election, their fondness to support the BSP in future. They appreciated the BSP for its efforts to empower dalits. Encouraged by the performance and popularity of BSP in UP, they said:

> We want power, not reservation. The 1993 elections have shown us as to where we should go. This election has proved that the BSP works for the harijans. Eleven harijans have been made ministers (in the SP-BSP government). Kanshi Ram is another Ambedkar. JD has kept Paswan with it to garner the votes of harijans.

It is worth emphasising that the popularity of the BSP among the dalits did not emerge out of its own efforts to work among them. Unlike the RPI of the 1950s and 1960s, it did not take up the question of land reforms. Nor did it take up the cultural issues such as reflected in Ambedkarism. In fact, it was much before the arrival of the BSP on the scene that the dalits started asserting in western UP. As mentioned earlier, they have been in search of a political alternative to the Congress from the 1960s itself; in 1960s they shifted their support to the RPI; in 1977 they voted for the Janata Party because the dalit leader Jagjivan Ram had joined the party; in 1989 they shifted to Janata Dal. Now with the arrival of the BSP, they have rallied behind it. As soon as the alternative ceased to exist or the dalits lost faith in it, the dalits fell back upon the Congress. Their support to the BSP had come at a time when the Congress has almost completely disintegrated. It will depend on future developments that if the BSP fails to satisfy dalits, as to whom will they align with: whether new political groups will emerge or whether intra-dalit politics will take some shape.

Even as the dalits have been looking for alternative political parties, they have set up cultural and social organisations. These organisations are reflection of growing awareness among dalits, an impact of the process of Ambedkarisation. What is significant about these organisations, unlike the political parties, is that while the priority of the political party is to get power, these social and cultural organisation fight against social, economic, political and cultural discrimination of dalits.

The BSP did not start with any concern for the cultural change. Ambedkarisation started much before the arrival of the BSP. The BSP has in fact appealed to these dalits who were already asserting their cultural identity. Since dalits were looking for an alternative, the BSP has provided them one, much like the earlier alternatives of RPI, Janata Party and Janata Dal. But the longevity of the BSP's support base will depend on whether it would be able to satisfy the dalits. Otherwise it too would go the way RPI did in the 1960s. However, the BSP, during its tenures in the governments, took up the cultural issues by organising Periyar mela in Lucknow in 1995, and renaming districts and places after Gautam Buddha, Jyotiba Phule, Shahu Maharaj and Mahamaya in 1997.

To sum up, the socio-cultural protest of dalits and assertion of their political identity operates at various levels. At the village level, it finds expression in "everyday forms of resistance", through informal means, through litigation, etc. Politically, the protest expresses itself in the form of search for an alternative: their own socio-cultural organisations, political parties or leaders. In cultural field, it is expressed through adherence to and emulation of Ambedkarism, sometimes resulting in conversion; through setting up temples of Ambedkar or Ravi Das. Some times, the protest results in caste-clashes. The issues related to dalit protest and their identity sometimes are picked up by the dalit organisations, individuals, and political parties and extended up to the district level.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the dalits were mainly mobilised by the non-Congress parties. Issues relating to them were the part of their broad agendas for the rural poor or the weaker sections. Dalit issues did not form a separate or specific part of agenda. Even the RPI combined the social issues with economic radicalism. But during last one-and-a-half decade, the issues relating to dalit protest and their identity have gained priority on the agendas of dalit socio-cultural and political organisations, intellectuals and some political parties like BSP and the Janata Dal. The BSP arrived at a time when the dalits were already affected by the process of Ambedkarisation. It did not initiate any cultural movement among them. Nor has it taken up the issues of land reforms. Its priority is power, not the economic and cultural issues. For the sake of power it can compromise with any political formulation irrespective of the ideology.

Notes

[This is a revised version of my paper presented at the twenty sixth All India Sociological Conference held on December 19-21, 1994 at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. I express my gratitude to Owen M Lynch and Gopal Guru for their suggestions and comments.]

1 Mainthana Inder Singh and Khanauda villages consist of more than 50-60 per cent households of jatavs. In the former jats and rajputs are the dominant castes and in the latter jats are such a caste. The conditions of jatavs are relatively better in these villages. Ambedkar's birth day is celebrated with enthusiasm there. It was in Mainthana Inder Singh that the Jatav Mahasabha was set up in 1982. It was also here as in some other villages that jatavs of Meerut held a panchayat (meeting) regarding

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Shergarhi episode of March-April 1994 – an incident involving jatav-administration clashes. As per the decision of the panchayat, the jatavs had gheraoed police stations, took out processions, resorted to road blockades, wore black badges, courted arrest, burnt the effigies of district officials, etc, in different parts of Meerut [Dainik Jagran, April 12, 1994]. In village Khanauda, besides the retaliation of jatavs against the 'oppression' by jats in the recent and distant past, a new development took place in 1993 assembly election : earlier in some elections, jats would create problems for jatavs in casting vote, but in this election it was other way round. An independent Jatav candidate who hails from this village contested for the Sardhana assembly constituency and no caste other than the jatavs could exercise their franchise. Opposition to prevention of jats and others from voting possibly might have resulted in bloodshed [for a profile of this village, see Baruah 1983].

Even village Jalalpur Urf Jalalabad, where the number of jatav households is smaller, Ambedkar jayanti is celebrated with gaiety and fervour. This village has seen the assertion of political identity of the OBCs (mainly Sainis) in last one decade through the process of communalisation and hinduisation. They have shifted their support to the BJP as they felt that the Congress which they had supported earlier did not recognise their social and political identity, and the BJP has done that [Singh 1992: 180-81]. The shift of Saini's support from Congress to BJP is pointer to certain trends in the new social movements of dalits and OBCs. Some jatavs of Palhera are staunch supporters of the BJP and RSS. One of them is member of municipal council, as this village falls under the municipal council, Meerut. Their allegiance to BJP seems to be more because of the political reasons – an indication of political assertion, than because of ideological reasons. Nagla Hareru assumes special significance because the conversion to Sikhism in 1988-89 started in this village, though a family of this village had converted to Buddhism in the 1960s. Ulakhpur village also saw the conversion of some jatavs to Sikhism.

2 There is no common definition of dalits. The politicians and activists concerned with the dalit issues include all 'oppressed' groups – scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs, minorities and women – in this category. Some academicians confine it to the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and OBCs, while still others restrict the term to include both ex. untouchables (SCs) and most backward castes (MBCs) only. Elsewhere [Singh 1992: chapter II] I have clubbed agrarian classes in two groups: the rural rich and the rural poor. Since the latter mainly belong to the low castes – SCs and OBCs – for the sake of analysis, I shall be referring to jatavs or chamars (SC) in this paper as dalits. The dalits will be used as a descriptive rather than an analytical category.

3 A discussion on the assertion of dalit identity in Meerut or western UP requires the consideration of the differential impact of agrarian systems which existed during the pre-independence period, i e, 'bhaiachara' and zamindari. Their legacy has different socio-economic, political and psychological implications for various agrarian classes [for a discussion on differences between these systems and their implications, see Singh 1992:10-14, 65-86].

4 Celebration of Ambedkar's birth day on April 14, 1978 in Agra city, included, among other activities, a seven hour long parade passing through the streets of Agra, with an elephant carrying the portrait of Ambedkar. The parade was opposed by the high castes, which resulted in the caste riots [Lynch 1981].

5 There has been a mushrooming growth of the unaided and unrecognised schools in the last one-and-a-half decades in many villages of western UP. In the absence of recorded figures, it is difficult to know the exact number of such schools. Some of these schools have been set up by Ambedkar committees/ Ambedkar welfare committees, as a part of their agendas [Singh 1995].

6 Giving their 'construction' of the term 'harijan', some jatav (unaided) school teachers considered the term derogatory to dalits. They said:

> In south and Maharashtra the illegitimate children are called harijans. The daughters of devdasis are kept in temples, and their sons are left in streets to fend for themselves. These off-springs of devdasis are called harijans...Otherwise why are only some castes called harijans?
>
> In Agra, the jatavs felt the term connotes the idea of being bastard and patronising and benevolent attitude of upper castes [Lynch 1969:31].
>
> For a discussion and usage of different terms for the same group – untouchables, depressed classes, scheduled castes, harijans by dalits affiliated to various political ideologies [Zelliot 1992:146].

7 Recent example of conversion to Buddhism was made by Ambedkar Mahasabha and Dalit Vichar Manch in Lucknow on October 14, 1994. Despite the clashes between two factions of the Mahasabha – one belonging to Chhedi Lal Shathi and another to K C Das, and arrest of some persons including a deputy inspector general of police (technical services), S R Darapura and wife of a bureaucrat, about 5,000 dalits and OBCs were reported to have converted to Buddhism (*The Times of India*, October 11, 14 and 17, 1994).

8 While it was an attack on jatavs by the goons of Muslim landlords in Nagla Hareru, it was the murder of three jatav journalists by jats in Sothawali near Hapur and panic created among jatavs in another village by Rajputs, which provoked them to look for security – and they sought to find it in Sikh religion [for a detailed report see Deep 1989].

9 There is apprehension on the part of many jatavs that conversion to other religion would result in their exclusion from the scheduled caste category, which might lead to denial of the concessions given to the scheduled castes by the government. The leaders of Ambedkar Mahasabha who mobilised dalits for conversion to Buddhism in Lucknow on October 14, 1994 tried to allay such fear. They argued that during the President's Rule in UP, a circular was issued by the government that dalits's conversion to Buddhism would not deprive them to their right to reservation and other concessions (*The Times of India*, October 8, 1994). Some scheduled castes who participated in the conversion ceremony in India still list themselves as Hindus in order that they can claim the concessions given to the scheduled castes [Zelloit 1992:145-46].

10 Euphoria created by the BKU agitation spearheaded by Mehendra Singh Tikait overshadowed an equally important agitation of dalits under the aegis of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Union (BMU) led by Jaipal Singh Mitharia. Starting against the highhandedness of the BMU supporters against dalits, the BKU agitation resulted in jat-chamar clashes. This agitation provides one of the most important example of dalit protest and assertion of their political identity in western UP [for details of the BMU agitation, see Singh 1992:102-09].

11 This Jatav Mahasabha is different from the Jatav Mahasabha which was set up in Aligarh in 1928. The latter was successor to Jatav Men's Association, an Agra based organisation of the 1920s. It was mainly a city based organisation. It was concerned mainly with two issues: one, change of the name of caste chamar to jatav, and two, nomination of its founder-member Paras Ram (its another founder-member was Inder Man), to the district board [Duncan 1979:165].

12 A dispute which took place between jatavs and jats in Mainthana Inder Singh village is known as Mainthana Kand (episode). The jatavs claimed the jat pradhan of the village had grabbed the village panchayat land. The jatavs wanted to construct a temple on this land and they gave a memorandum to the government in the name of Akhil Bharatiya Ambedkar Committee. It led to the deployment of police in the village for some days. Jatavs wanted to construct a temple on the village panchayat land, and later on set up a school at this place. Apart from the newly constructed temple of the jatavs, the village has two more temple – one belonging to banias and another to a rajput. However, there were differences among the jatavs: some of them wanted to make a Buddhist tomb instead of a temple.

13 I have already referred to such panachayat (meeting) in Maithana Inder Singh village relating to Shergarh incident. Even on the eve of 1993 assembly election, the jatavs of Sardhana constituency held two panchayats in Alipur village: once at the residence of the jatav village pradhan, and second time in the Ambedkar Bhavan. Around 200 representatives from 108 villages participated in the meetings. Three jatavs were interested in contesting the election as independent candidates. Since Sardhana constituency happens to be a general constituency, Alipur panchayat was to decide as to whom the jatavs should vote. The panchayat set up a committee of fifteen members belonging to different socio-political organisations and parties. On the basis of majority decision, the committee

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decided to support one candidate – Dinesh Kumar of Khanauda village. But later it was discovered by the jatavs that this candidate was clandestinely supported by the BJP candidate Jagdish Pundeer, which led to resentment against Dinesh Kumar. However, it did not deter many jatavs to vote a candidate of their 'own' caste. Although, Dinesh Kumar could not win, he got more than 2,000 votes, which cut into the base of JD to the advantage of the BJP.

14 Most backward castes (MBCs), such as dhiwars, barbers, jogis, potters, etc, are the most ardent supporters and jatavs the most critical of the BJP in western UP. It is perhaps for the first time that the MBCs have found a party (BJP) with which they can identify ideologically. Congress' populism of anti-poverty programmes could not keep them satisfied any longer, like the scheduled castes. But unlike the scheduled castes, particularly jatavs, they did not have any alternative ideologies like Ambedkarism, to counter hindutva. They also lacked any leader, party or organisation which could affect the assertion of their separate/independent identity. Mandal Commission report also did not appeal to them, unlike the upper sections of the OBCs like yadavs, gujars, lodhs, kurmis, etc. In such a situation, the BJP's strategy to make special efforts to approach different sections of Hindus through the ideology of hindutva made the MBCs its most ardent supporters. The BJP seems to have become the first party which gave them a sense of separate cultural and political identity.

15 BSP prefers 'Bahujan' to dalits. Kanshi Ram likens 'Daliting with begging' [Illaiah 1994:669].

16 The political and ideological conflict between the BSP and RPI (Prakash Ambedkar-led) finds its reflection in Maharashtra also [Guru 1994:2700].

17 One interesting example of such competition was seen during the Bhopa agitations in Muzaffarnagar district. (There were two agitations at the same time: one which created euphoria led by BKU of Tikait, and another which did not catch the attention of many observers was led by BMU. When a dalit refers to the Bhopa agitation, he/she does it about the latter, and when some observers or BKU/jats refer to the Bhopa agitation, they do so about the former [for details see Singh 1992:117, n 83].) Like other political groups, the BSP also tried to cash in on the Bhopa case (of the BMU, not of the BKU). But Kanshi Ram was not allowed to share the dias with BMU, and he had to erect a separate dias to address dalits [Singh 1992: 122, n 123].

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